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The Merkel Government's Politics of the Past

The red-green coalition which preceded Angela Merkel's Grand Coalition and which governed Germany between 1998 and 2005 and the generational change that came with the advent to power of 'the generation of 1968' contributed significantly to a new understanding of the place that the Nazi past should occupy in Germany's official memory discourse. On numerous occasions, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his Foreign Secretary Joschka Fischer emphasised the importance of Holocaust centred memory for the identity of the Federal Republic.¹

In an interview, Schröder made it very clear that Germany's history between 1933 and 1945 was irrevocably part of German national identity: 'The past can neither be undone nor can it be overcome. But one can learn from history and that is what we Germans have done. ... Memory of the National Socialist period, of war, genocide and crime has become part of our national identity.'² Two key initiatives which came to fruition under the Schröder government illustrate this acceptance very well: the completion of the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin and the compensation for forced labour which was at last settled under the red-green coalition.

In contrast to the traditional approach of the political left, this uncompromising acceptance of Germany's historical legacy was not to result in what had been termed 'negative nationalism'. The red-green government's approach arguably represented a symbiosis of previous approaches resulting in more assertiveness and positive nationalism *in spite of* or maybe even *because of* acknowledging Germany's National Socialist past and its crimes and the responsibility that emerged from it for later generations.

Already early on in Schröder's chancellorship it became very clear that he adopted a very pragmatic approach to the German past and the role it should play in united Germany's national identity. In a talk show in November 1998 Schröder described the Germany he was planning to represent as 'less inhibited' and 'in a positive sense maybe even more German'.³ With this, Schröder depicted something quite without tradition in post-45 German history: to be 'more German' in a 'positive sense' in spite of acknowledging German historical responsibility for the crimes committed between 1933 and 1945. Until then, positive expressions of German national identity had either been impossible because of Auschwitz, as the liberal left had tended to argue, or had relied on a relativisation of the Holocaust in order to sustain themselves.⁴

In his government declaration of 10 November 1998, Schröder furthermore talked of the 'self-confidence of a grown-up nation' which did not need to feel inferiority or

¹ For a recent study of the continued presence of the Nazi past in the Berlin Republic, see Carolyn Pearce, *Contemporary Germany and the Nazi Legacy: Remembrance, Politics and the Dialectics of Normality* (Basingstoke, 2008)

² Gerhard Schröder, "Gedenken an den 8. Mai 1945: 'Wir stehen erst jetzt am Ende einer langen Nachkriegszeit'" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 May 2005, available at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/deutschland/artikel/688/52636/> accessed 20 March 2007.

³ Quoted in Marcel Tambarin, 'Vom Dritten Reich zur "Berliner Republik". Deutschlands Suche nach der Normalität.' In: Anne Saint Sauveur-Henn and Marc Muylaert, *Alte und neue Identitätsbilder im heutigen Deutschland* (Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1999), pp. 97-106, p. 102.

⁴ These positions became very pronounced during the Historikerstreit in 1986/7. For a good account of this debate see Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

superiority towards others, a nation which ‘faces history and its responsibilities but which – in spite of all its readiness to engage with it – looks ahead to the future’.⁵

With the help of a rhetorical question, he explained in an interview in 1999 that he considered an acknowledgement of Germany’s past as empowering rather than posing a constraint: ‘Does the readiness of a new generation to engage [with the German past], not to forget, not also create an opportunity to represent one’s own interests in a more uninhibited manner?’⁶ Thus, instead of ‘normalisation’ happening at the expense of Holocaust centred memory, Schröder offered a new approach which acknowledged historical responsibility but still allowed Germany to move on.

The red-green government also did not promote the renewed focus on German victims which gained considerable presence in public, literary and historical discourses at the beginning of the new millennium. In contrast to earlier accounts of German victimhood, the new discourse was made prominent by members of the left-liberal elite which had traditionally concentrated on suffering caused by the Germans and resulting questions of guilt and responsibility rather than German suffering. Hence, the publication of *Im Krebsgang* (Crabwalk) by Günter Grass in 2002 and of *Der Brand* (The Fire) by Jörg Friedrich in 2003 signified the beginning of a strong new trend in debates about the German past which unsurprisingly led some commentators to express their concern that the renewed emphasis on German suffering might happen at the expense of Holocaust centred memory.⁷

Although the idea of a Centre against Expulsions was mainly backed by the political right – expellees traditionally representing a key source of CDU/CSU support – there was modest support also from the left, the late Peter Glotz probably being the most prominent example. Both Schröder and Fischer, however, explicitly warned against a renewed focus on German victimhood. In the context of the debate about a Centre against Expulsions, Joschka Fischer in an interview spoke out against what he perceived to be an attempt to relativise German guilt through an intensive focus on German suffering. He expressed the view that the emphasis should be on what led to German suffering, not on what others did to the Germans but what the Germans had done to themselves. Fischer also strongly dismissed the claim that German suffering used to be a taboo subject. Himself a descendent of a German ethnic minority whose family left Hungary in 1946, he said: ‘A taboo? Quite to the contrary! All my childhood consists of these stories of expulsion, occupation, nights of bombing raids

⁵ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, *Bulletin 2005* (Berlin 2006).

⁶ Interview with Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, ‘Eine offene Republik’, *Die Zeit*, 4 February 1999, p.35

⁷ There are numerous literary examples of this renewed focus on German suffering, some of which actually preceded the publication of *Crabwalk* and can be seen as predecessors of the ‘Germans as victims’ discourse, e.g. W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Frankfurt/Main, 2001) and Dieter Forte, *Schweigen oder Sprechen* (Frankfurt/Main, 2002). For an academic discussion of some of these literary contributions, see the Special Issue of *German Life and Letters* 57, no. 4 (2004): 343-503. Popular historical accounts include, for example, Klaus Rainer Röhl, *Verbotene Trauer: Ende der deutschen Tabus* (Tübingen, 2002); Volker Hage, *Hamburg 1943* (Frankfurt/Main, 2003); Franz Kurowski, *Dresden Februar 1945* (Wien, 2003). The new discourse was also represented in the wider public debate. *Der Spiegel* paid considerable attention to the bombing war and expulsions in special issues, a series as well as book publications.

The following publications have contributed to the academic debate over the discourse on German suffering: Norbert Frei, ‘1945 und wir. Wie aus Tätern Opfer werden.’ *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 50, no. 3 (2005): 356-364; Eric Langenbacher, ‘Moralpolitik versus Moralphilosophie: Recent Struggles over the Construction of Cultural Memory in Germany.’ *German Politics and Society* 76, no. 3 (2005): 106-133; Bill Niven (ed.), *Germans as Victims* (Basingstoke, 2006).

and the meetings of the expellees.⁸ Schröder similarly asserted the need to decisively oppose any attempts which tried to turn the perpetrators discourse into a victims discourse thus attempting to relativise Nazi crimes.⁹

Even though the sincerity of the red-green coalition's relationship with Holocaust centred memory has been questioned on a number of occasions with some identifying a 'culture of contrition'¹⁰ or a 'culture of confession' (*Kultur des Schuldeingeständnisses*)¹¹ while others criticised it in particular for its 'casual tone towards the Nazi past',¹² there is no doubt that the Schröder government offered a new way of accepting responsibility for the past and integrating it into the 21st century present by explicitly making it a key element of German national identity.¹³

Angela Merkel thus came to power at a crucial time regarding Germany's relationship with its past. Not only was the discourse on Germany's Nazi past more diverse than at any other point in Germany's post-war history, there was also an increasing need for a new approach to commemoration which did not rely on eye witnesses.

Hence, Merkel's advent to power gave rise to a number of important questions regarding Germany's politics of the past. Where would she position herself in view of these recent developments but also in view of her GDR biography? Would she continue and maybe even reinforce the institutionalisation of Holocaust centred memory and – in view of the force of the return of the topic of German victimhood – complement it with the institutionalisation of the memory of German suffering, or would she emphasise the latter at the expense of the former? Or would she try to go back to the *status quo ante* and align herself with Kohl's revisionism by returning to drawing the famous line under the German past? These are the questions this paper will seek to answer by looking at Angela Merkel's first three years in office.

Angela Merkel and the German Past

Whereas there were still a lot of discussions regarding the place of the Nazi past in post-unification German memory and identity during the Schröder governments, fundamental questions regarding Germany's past and its consequences for German identity have hardly featured since Angela Merkel took office in 2005. This is not to say that the past was not present, however. Germany's Nazi past was the key theme of a number of stories and scandals which have occupied newspaper headlines on several occasions since 2005. In August 2006, for example, the last 'moralische Instanz' (moral authority) seemed to fall when Günter Grass, icon of the left, admitted to having been a member of the Waffen-SS. In the same month, Hermann Schäfer –

⁸ Interview with Foreign Secretary Joschka Fischer, *Die Zeit*, 28 August 2003, available at <http://www.zeit.de/2003/36/Fischer> accessed 20 March 2007.

⁹ Gerhard Schröder, 'Gedenken an den 8. Mai 1945: "Wir stehen erst jetzt am Ende einer langen Nachkriegszeit"' *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 May 2005, available at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/deutschland/artikel/688/52636/> accessed 20 March 2007.

¹⁰ Karl Wilds, 'Identity Creation and the Culture of Contrition: Recasting "Normality" in the Berlin Republic.' *German Politics* 9, no.1 (2000): 83-102.

¹¹ Michael Jeismann, *Auf Wiedersehen Gestern. Die deutsche Vergangenheit und die Politik von morgen* (Munich, 2001)

¹² Bill Niven (ed.), 'Introduction.' In *Germans as Victims* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 10.

¹³ See also Wulf Kansteiner, 'Losing the War, Winning the Memory Battle: The Legacy of Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany.' In: Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fugo (eds.): *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham, N.C., 2006): 102-146. Kansteiner describes the approach of the red-green government as 'relaxed and relatively self-confident'.

working for Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media (Kulturstaatsminister) Bernd Neumann – was invited to give a speech at the opening concert ‘Gedenken Buchenwald’(!) of the ‘Arts Festival Weimar’. Schäfer – a historian with a research interest in the expulsions of Germans, and unaware that Buchenwald survivors were sitting in the audience – gave a wholly inappropriate speech which nearly exclusively dealt with German victimhood in the context of the expulsions while hardly mentioning the victims of the Holocaust. In April 2007, Günther Oettinger in a eulogy for Hans Filbinger, one of his predecessors as Minister President of Baden-Wuerttemberg who had to resign in 1978 after having been exposed as a judge in the German navy who sentenced deserters to death even though the war had officially already ended, described Filbinger as ‘an opponent of the National Socialist regime’ and ‘not a Nazi’. It was only after an intervention by Chancellor Angela Merkel that Oettinger withdrew the comment and apologised. In autumn 2007, newsreader and TV show presenter Eva Herman lost her job with the *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* for controversial statements regarding family values and the ‘Third Reich’. Another debate which accused the protagonists of an inappropriate and insensitive trivialisation of Holocaust memory was sparked off when – in the wake of the Eva-Hermann scandal – the comedy duo Schmidt & Plocher used what they called a ‘Nazometer’ to gauge right-wing tendencies in their audience.

Although all these events ensured a continued presence of the German past in the public realm, they lacked the fundamental character that debates about the role of the Nazi past for German national identity occupied in the 1980s during the *Historikerstreit* and the debates about ‘normalisation’ which accompanied the early years of the Schröder government.

The uninhibited way in which Angela Merkel even in the early stages of her chancellorship lectured Presidents Bush and Putin on human rights issues – the former over the US detention centre at Guantánamo Bay and the latter over his government’s treatment of human rights organisations in Russia – casts doubt over her ability to show sensitivity regarding Germany’s historical legacy. Right at the beginning of its term in office, the Grand Coalition set out to complement the institutionalisation of Holocaust centred memory which had taken place under the red-green government – its most visible sign being the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin which opened in May 2005 – with the institutionalisation of the memory of German victimhood. In their coalition agreement, the two main parties committed themselves to ‘dealing with forced migration, flight and expulsion, both socially as well as historically’ by dedicating to it a ‘visible sign’ in Berlin. In view of the strong reactions that the idea for a Centre against Expulsions had already provoked in some of the countries where the expulsions had taken place at the end of the war, most notably Poland and the Czech Republic, it was emphasised that this was to happen in a ‘spirit of reconciliation’.

These early signs seemed to suggest that the Merkel government’s politics of the past would be characterised by an emphasis on the memory of German suffering – possibly at the expense of Holocaust centred memory – and a very confident stance internationally which showed that the ‘burden’ of German history was not sufficient anymore to ensure some modesty vis-à-vis key victorious powers of World War II with regard to values which, after all, had to be (re)introduced to (West) Germany by the western powers in the aftermath of military and moral defeat only in 1945.

As became obvious particularly in Polish-German relations but also in the way Angela Merkel strengthened Germany’s relations with Israel – largely neglected by her predecessor who had visited Israel only once during his chancellorship and by and

large left the Middle East to his Foreign Secretary Joschka Fischer – the first female chancellor who was socialised in the GDR has shown much more sensitivity towards issues of Germany's historical consciousness than could first be anticipated. Her approach has been characterised by three key features:

1. an unambiguous acknowledgement of German historical responsibility arising from its Nazi past without any attempts to 'normalise' the German past;
2. a clear appreciation of German suffering coupled with an unambiguous acknowledgement that this happened as a *consequence* of Nazi Germany's aggressive expansionism;
3. the creation of a link between past, present and future: the impact of Germany's historical responsibility on discourse *and* policy.

An unambiguous acknowledgement of German historical responsibility arising from its Nazi past without any attempts to 'normalise' the German past

Generally speaking, Angela Merkel has continued the consolidation of Holocaust centred memory as an integral part of German identity without any ifs and buts. This unambiguous acknowledgement of German historical responsibility does not prevent her – just as it did not inhibit Schröder but rather seemed to empower him – from representing Germany assertively in the international arena. She has made her acceptance of Germany's historical responsibility explicit on numerous occasions at home and abroad. For her, too, Germany's National Socialist past is a key constituent part of German national identity and 'only by fully accepting our past at all times can we shape our future together', she stated in a speech at Warsaw University in 2007.¹⁴ Merkel's politics of the past and her sensitivity towards responsibilities arising from German history have become most obvious in the way she has fostered relations with Israel right from the beginning of her chancellorship.

The general approach of the Merkel government towards Israeli-German relations is characterised by a fundamental acknowledgement that these relations are 'special' and 'unique'. There is no indication to suggest that any kind of 'normalisation' of these relations would be desirable. In an interview, Foreign Secretary Frank-Walter Steinmeier described the memory of the Holocaust and the special relations with Israel which have arisen from that as being a key constituent part of the Federal Republic's foreign policy. He makes the basis for this special relationship very clear: 'With no other country are we linked so inseparably through our history.'¹⁵

In March 2008, Angela Merkel visited Jerusalem – her third visit to Israel since becoming Chancellor – to mark its 60th anniversary later in the year. Since the official anniversary celebrations only took place in May, she was the first among the heads of state and government to congratulate. Together with President Shimon Peres, she visited the grave of David Ben-Gurion and laid a wreath at Yad Vashem where

¹⁴ Angela Merkel, Speech at the University of Warsaw, 16 March 2007, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_5294/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2007/03/2007-03-16-rede-merkel-warschau.html accessed 2 May 2007

¹⁵ Interview with Foreign Secretary Frank-Walter Steinmeier, 14 May 2008, available at <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Infoservice/Presse/Interviews/2008/080514-BM-Tribuene.html> accessed 2 June 2008

members of the German and Israeli governments for the first time jointly commemorated the victims of the Shoah in the Hall of Remembrance.

In a video message issued before her departure to Israel, Angela Merkel described the stable and friendly relations between Israel and Germany in view of Germany's National Socialist history and the Holocaust as 'miracles of history' and asserted: 'We Germans want to do justice to this responsibility.'¹⁶

After two German heads of state – in 2000, President Johannes Rau, and in 2005, President Horst Köhler spoke in front of the Israeli parliament – Angela Merkel was not only the first German Chancellor to be invited to deliver a speech to the Knesset, which had to change its statutes in order to be able to accommodate this, but also the first head of government.

In her speech Merkel emphasised the importance of the Shoah for Israeli-German relations by asserting that Germany and Israel were and always would remain linked in a special way by the memory of the Shoah. She also explicitly endorsed the view of the singularity of the Holocaust. At the same time as emphasising the history of the Shoah that linked Germany and Israel, she also pointed to the common values of the two countries, however: 'Germany and Israel, both share, the values of freedom, democracy and respect for human dignity.'¹⁷

There was some controversy over the fact that Angela Merkel would deliver her speech in German, 'the language of the perpetrators', and some members of the Knesset threatened not to attend. In the end, Merkel delivered the introduction in Hebrew, and although some members of the Knesset were absent, on the whole her speech was received very well and even honoured with a standing ovation.

Avi Primor, former Israeli ambassador to Germany, suggested that Angela Merkel's considerable sensitivity towards Israel was not only due to her awareness of Germany's National Socialist history but also due to the shortcomings of the GDR in this respect. He pointed out that her upbringing in the GDR made her very aware of the hostile stance the GDR took against Israel, according to Levi 'the worst state in the communist bloc.'¹⁸ In her speech to the Knesset, Merkel seemed to confirm this when she referred to her own biography: 'I myself spent the first 35 years of my life in the German Democratic Republic, a part of Germany where National Socialism was considered a West German problem. But the GDR did not recognize the State of Israel until shortly before its own demise. It took more than 40 years before Germany as a whole acknowledged and embraced both its historical responsibility and the State of Israel'.¹⁹

Merkel's clear stance was received very well in Israel. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described the negotiations as 'exceptional and perhaps historical' and called Angela Merkel and her government 'honest and true friends of Israel'. He thanked the German Chancellor for her cooperation and for the way she had expressed Germany's

¹⁶ Chancellor Angela Merkel, Video podcast regarding visit to Israel, 15 March 2008, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_46996/Content/DE/Podcast/2008/2008-03-15-Video-Podcast/2008-03-15-video-podcast-israel.html accessed 8 May 2008

¹⁷ Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Knesset in Jerusalem, 18 March 2008, available at <http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Artikel/2008/03/Anlagen/2008-03-18-rede-knesset-englisch.property=publicationFile.pdf> accessed 8 May 2008

¹⁸ Interview with Avi Primor, former Israeli Ambassador to Germany, 17 March 2008, available at http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/interview_dlf/755356/ accessed 8 May 2008

¹⁹ Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Knesset in Jerusalem, 18 March 2008, available at <http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Artikel/2008/03/Anlagen/2008-03-18-rede-knesset-englisch.property=publicationFile.pdf> accessed 8 May 2008

commitment towards Israel's future.²⁰ Merkel's positive reception at the level of government is also mirrored in society at large. A survey commissioned by the Konrad Adenauer foundation in 2007 found that 60% of respondents in Israel considered Merkel's election as German Chancellor to have improved the perception of Germany in Israel.²¹

A clear appreciation of German suffering coupled with an unambiguous acknowledgement that this happened as a *consequence* of Nazi Germany's aggressive expansionism

Angela Merkel's appreciation of German suffering has been most pronounced with regard to victims of the expulsions from eastern and central Europe towards the end of the war and during its immediate aftermath. This has not helped Polish-German relations which were already rather tense when Angela Merkel took over from Gerhard Schröder. Apart from differences that arose from the present, for example, regarding the pipeline deal between Germany and Russia which Schröder and Putin had agreed, it has been the common past and how to commemorate it appropriately that has turned out to be highly problematic. Plans for a Centre against Expulsions – an idea conceived by the expellee organisations already in the late 1990s – and attempts by the Prussian Trust (*Preußische Treuhand*) to challenge ownership rights in Poland and the Czech Republic and pursue restitution claims even though these are neither supported by the German government nor even by the League of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen*), have not provided the basis for smooth bilateral relations.²² Even though Angela Merkel has tried to redress the balance of Schröder's legacy and prioritise relations with Poland since coming to office, the Nazi past and the commemoration of German suffering have continued to cast a shadow over Polish-German relations under her Chancellorship.

Merkel reinforced Holocaust centered memory by acknowledging German guilt combined with open contrition but combined it with efforts to also acknowledge and institutionalize the memory of German suffering by planning to dedicate a 'visible sign' to it in Berlin. Unsurprisingly, this move has provoked concerns in Poland that Germany was trying to relativise history by emphasising the memory of German suffering at the expense of Holocaust centred memory. In an interview with a German newspaper, Donald Tusk, the new Polish Prime Minister who took office in 2007, articulated Polish concerns by pointing out that nobody wanted to prevent the

²⁰ Press Statements of Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Olmert, 17 March 2008, available at http://www.bundesregierung.de/nr_1516/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2008/03/2008-03-17-pk-merkel-und-olmert.html accessed 8 May 2008

²¹ 'Merkel in Israel: Neue Herzlichkeit', FAZ.NET, 17 March 2008, available at <http://www.faz.net/s/RubDDBDABB9457A437BAA85A49C26FB23A0/Doc~E1A72416FC1214B1B9D139B26E8E50071~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>) accessed 8 May 2008

²² Poles from formerly eastern Poland who lost their property to Russia or the Ukraine filed a claim with the European Court of Human Rights and won restitution from the Polish government. Hence, the Polish government is keen for Germany to take responsibility for any claims that might be successful in future. Donald Tusk, the new Polish Prime Minister who came to office in 2007, reiterated the demand that the German government would have to take responsibility for German restitution claims (see interview with Donald Tusk, 'Die Geschichte ist wieder Ballast', FAZ.NET, 10 December 2007, available at <http://www.faz.net/s/RubDDBDABB9457A437BAA85A49C26FB23A0/Doc~EBED0CCA095EF4EF080B4E4479D3A0117~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html> accessed 11 March 2008

Germans from commemorating their own suffering. What was problematic and caused concern was, in his view, when memory of German suffering happened at the expense of Holocaust centred memory and German collective responsibility. He also argued that the way Germans were nowadays dealing with history has made 'the past become a burden once again'.²³

Nevertheless, Angela Merkel has repeatedly emphasised the importance of commemorating German suffering and the government's commitment to establishing a 'visible sign' in Berlin, albeit it always with a clear eye to cause and effect. In a speech at an event commemorating sixty years of expulsions organised by the CDU/CSU parliamentary party entitled 'Expulsions – Sixty Years on, Sixty Years of Paths to Reconciliation', for example, she described the commemoration of the victims of the expulsions as an important part of German identity. At the same time she made it clear, however, that without the suffering caused by National Socialism and the Second World War – suffering caused *by the Germans* – the expulsions of Germans would never have happened.²⁴

Acknowledging the immense pain and suffering that Germany caused Poland during the National Socialist period and the Second World War, in a speech at Warsaw University in 2007, Angela Merkel reiterated her position to support a Centre against Expulsions so that those Germans who suffered in the context of the expulsions could commemorate the experience 'in a dignified way'. Specifying the term 'in a dignified way' she made clear, however, that in her view, this did not mean a re-interpretation of history: 'For me, such a commemoration is dignified when not only German expellees and refugees but also others, naturally also Polish expellees, can commemorate their suffering and when one thing in particular is clear: there is to be no re-interpretation of history by Germany.'²⁵

In her speech on the 50th anniversary of the League of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen*), she took this further and described the commemoration of the suffering of expellees and refugees as an important part of German memory culture and identity. The commemoration of German suffering was to take place in the knowledge and acceptance of Germany's continued responsibility for the breach of civilization of the Holocaust and the Second World War, however. Referring to the shortcomings of the state in which she grew up, Angela Merkel also specifically addressed the fact that it was particularly difficult for expellees in the GDR since they were unable to form relevant associations and because flight and expulsions were simply ignored in the public consciousness of the GDR.²⁶

In December 2007, Donald Tusk suggested an alternative to the Centre against Expulsions and proposed that the expulsions could be commemorated within the

²³ Interview with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, 'Die Geschichte ist wieder Ballast', *FAZ.NET*, 10 December 2007, available at <http://www.faz.net/s/RubDDBDABB9457A437BAA85A49C26FB23A0/Doc~EBED0CCA095EF4EF080B4E4479D3A0117~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html> accessed 11 March 2008

²⁴ Speech by Chancellor Angela Merkel at an event commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of expulsions organised by the CDU/CSU parliamentary party, 18 September 2006, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_5296/Content/DE/Rede/2006/09/2006-09-19-rede-bkin-60-jahre-vertreibung.html accessed 1 March 2007

²⁵ Angela Merkel, Speech at the University of Warsaw, 16 March 2007, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_5294/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2007/03/2007-03-16-rede-merkel-warschau.html accessed 2 May 2007

²⁶ Speech by Chancellor Angela Merkel on the 50th anniversary of the League of Expellees, 22 October 2007, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_5296/Content/DE/Rede/2007/10/2007-10-22-50-jahre-bund-der-vertriebenen.html accessed 13 February 2008

broader context of a World War II museum in Gdansk which was to be established through international cooperation. Angela Merkel made it quite clear that she did not consider this as a viable alternative to the Centre against Expulsions and dismissed the idea of the new Polish Prime Minister to integrate German suffering within a larger project that would allow commemorative practice on an international scale.

The creation of a link between past, present and future: the impact of Germany's historical responsibility on discourse and policy

Whereas Angela Merkel did not hesitate to alienate the Polish government over the planned Centre against Expulsions, she used the argument of Germany's historical responsibility towards Israel to justify new initiatives as well as possible future policy. Her approach to Israel differs not so much in terms of its basic premise – there is a cross-party consensus in Germany which ritually confirms Israel's 'right to exist' and its security as part of Germany's *raison d'être* – but in the intensity with which she has fostered Israeli-German relations. Bilateral relations between Germany and Israel have never been as good as under Chancellor Merkel's leadership, or, as the *Economist* put it: 'It is almost official: Germany is Israel's second-best friend.'²⁷ Her approach also differs in terms of the implications of these relations for German foreign policy, in particular towards Iran. Merkel's approach towards Israel has made it very clear that Germany's responsibility for the past extends not only to the present but also to the future. In a video podcast on the eve of her visit to Israel in 2008, she said that Germany needed to consider the responsibility for the past in its relations to Israel but at the same time it had to direct the bilateral relationship towards the future.²⁸

In her speech to the Knesset on 18 March, Merkel suggested that the view often voiced in speeches and at ceremonial events that Germany and Israel are linked by a special and unique relationship meant in concrete terms that any attempts to play down or trivialize Nazi atrocities must be nipped in the bud. In this speech she also commented on surveys that showed that a clear majority of Europeans considered Israel a bigger threat to the world than Iran. In her view, politicians in Europe could not afford to 'fearfully bow to public opinion and flinch from imposing further stricter sanctions on Iran to persuade it to halt its nuclear programme'. Linking memory and policy, Merkel called for ways of remembering not just through places of remembrance but by constantly recalling these memories, thus ensuring the presence of memory when determining (policy) behaviour: 'Thoughts must become words, and words deeds.'²⁹

Accordingly, Merkel has attempted to build bridges from the past to the future by introducing new joint initiatives. During her visit to mark Israel's 60th anniversary, bilateral annual government consultations were agreed, for example, which were to put the bilateral relationship on a broader basis and to also impact on the two societies.

²⁷ 'Germany and Israel: Friends in High Places.' *The Economist*, 19 March 2008, available at http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10881121 accessed 8 May 2008

²⁸ Chancellor Angela Merkel, Video podcast regarding visit to Israel, 15 March 2008, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_46996/Content/DE/Podcast/2008/2008-03-15-Video-Podcast/2008-03-15-video-podcast-israel.html accessed 8 May 2008

²⁹ Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Knesset in Jerusalem, 18 March 2008, available at <http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Artikel/2008/03/Anlagen/2008-03-18-rede-knesset-englisch.property=publicationFile.pdf> accessed 8 May 2008

Such consultations had until then been restricted to a very small group of countries including France, Italy, Spain, Poland and Russia. The introduction of the government consultations – largely hailed as opening a ‘new chapter’ in Israeli-German relations and for Germany the first ones outside of Europe – was to consolidate the ‘special relationship’ by strengthening Israeli-German political, cultural, economic and societal relations and add a new quality to the bilateral relationship which looks to the future.

Merkel went beyond a closer bilateral relationship based on more cooperation in a number of policy areas, however. She also went beyond an acknowledgment of Israel’s ‘right to exist’. For her concrete responsibility arises with regard to Israel’s security: during a joint press conference with Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, she made it very explicit that she considered a threat to Israel to be a ‘threat to us’.³⁰ And although she put a lot of emphasis on a diplomatic solution with Iran, her strong and unambiguous comments in this context are likely to restrict her policy options in the case of future military action by the US and/or Israel against Iran.

On a number of occasions, she clearly went beyond the traditional payment of lip-service. Merkel repeatedly made clear in this context that words have to be followed by deeds. Already in her speech to the 42nd Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2006, she made the historical responsibility of Germany towards Israel in view of Iran’s provocations very explicit:

‘... we are, of course, compelled to respond to the totally unacceptable provocations of the Iranian President. I am particularly called to say this in my role as Chancellor of Germany. A president who questions Israel’s right to exist, a president who denies the Holocaust cannot expect Germany to show any tolerance at all on this issue. We have learned the lessons of our past.’³¹

In her speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2007, Angela Merkel also explicitly made clear that for her as German Chancellor Israel’s security was non-negotiable and that this constituted one of the fundamental principles of Germany’s foreign policy. Again, she pointed out that for her this had implications that went beyond words: ‘And that being the case, we have to do more than pay lip-service to it.’³² In a similar vein, after having received the Leo Baeck prize from the Central Council of Jews in Germany in November 2007, Merkel said in her acceptance speech that speeches at special events such as this do not suffice. It will be afterwards, in daily life, that it can be seen if they have an effect, if ‘speeches are followed by deeds’ that is.³³

Merkel’s Foreign Secretary Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who used to be Gerhard Schröder’s Chief of Staff, reiterated Merkel’s basic position but seemed more careful

³⁰ Press Statements of Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Olmert, 17 March 2008, available at http://www.bundesregierung.de/nn_1516/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2008/03/2008-03-17-pk-merkel-und-olmert.html accessed 8 May 2008

³¹ Speech by Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 4 February 2006, available at http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=170 accessed 1 March 2007

³² Speech by Angela Merkel to the United Nations General Assembly, 25 September 2007, available at http://www.bundesregierung.de/nn_6566/Content/EN/Reden/2007/09/2007-09-25-bk-un-vollversammlung_en.html accessed 8 May 2008

³³ Speech by Angela Merkel on receiving the Leo Baeck prize, 6 November 2007, available at <http://www.zentralratjuden.de/de/article/1467.html> accessed 8 May 2008

regarding concrete implications for policy. In his speech to the German *Bundestag* on 29 May 2008 on the occasion of Israel's 60th anniversary, Steinmeier linked past and present by asserting that Germany's commitment to Israel's secure future had arisen from its responsibility for the past. He said this in the context of pointing out Germany's special responsibility for peace in the Middle East, however.³⁴

In addition to Angela Merkel's very clear positioning regarding Israel's security and its foreign policy implications for Germany, right from the beginning of her chancellorship, she has placed great emphasis on values such as freedom and democracy. This became not only apparent in the way she has lectured the United States as well as Russia on human rights issues, but also in the way she has used Germany's Nazi past as well as the history of the GDR and the former Soviet bloc to promote values such as the rule of law, freedom and justice. Referring to the key role that the Solidarity movement played in bringing down communism, she said in her speech at the University of Warsaw that freedom and democracy should never be taken for granted but need to be protected and defended, again adding a reference to her own biography: 'Those of us who lived without freedom [*in Unfreiheit*] know that.'³⁵ The German Chancellor also used her speech on the 50th anniversary of the League of Expellees to make this point:

The former *Heimat* will of course always remain part of one's identity. [...] As expellees you know this better than many others. You feel when people in other places have to flee or are being expelled. You know how important it is to fight tirelessly for human rights and against unjust regimes, war, violence and expulsions. It is for this commitment, I would like to thank you in particular.'³⁶

Much more explicitly than her predecessors, Angela Merkel has linked past, present and future and expressed – especially with regard to Israel – in concrete terms what the lessons learnt from the past should be, i.e. a strong commitment to Israel's security and the promotion of human rights.

Conclusion

Angela Merkel's politics of the past is characterised by some continuity with that of the Schröder government. Especially in the context of Israeli-German relations, it became evident that she unambiguously acknowledges Germany's historical responsibility arising from its Nazi past without attempting to 'normalise' or relativise it. Adopting the approach of the Schröder government, she does not consider this to be an obstacle to positive expressions of German national identity and a very confident stance in foreign affairs.

³⁴ Speech by Foreign Secretary Frank-Walter Steinmeier to the *Bundestag*, 29 May 2008, available at <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2008/080529-sechzig-jahre-israel-steinmeier-bt.html> accessed 20 June 2008

³⁵ Angela Merkel, Speech at the University of Warsaw, 16 March 2007, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_5294/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2007/03/2007-03-16-rede-merkel-warschau.html accessed 2 May 2007

³⁶ Speech by Chancellor Angela Merkel on the 50th anniversary of the League of Expellees, 22 October 2007, available at http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/nn_5296/Content/DE/Rede/2007/10/2007-10-22-50-jahre-bund-der-vertriebenen.html accessed 13 February 2008

Regarding the other key strand of German collective memory – the memory of German suffering – which has been particularly prominent since the turn of the millennium – Angela Merkel has clearly positioned herself in line with Helmut Kohl, however. Her support for the Centre against Expulsions, as laid down in the coalition agreement of her Grand Coalition, shows Merkel's appreciation of the memory of German suffering, even though she has frequently emphasised the importance of acknowledging cause and effect in this context. The plan to establish a 'visible sign' in Berlin which commemorates the suffering experienced by Germans in the expulsions suggests that she translates the acknowledgement of German suffering into the need for an institutionalisation of this memory, even if this happens at the expense of Germany's relationship with Poland.

At first sight, this makes Angela Merkel's politics of the past appear inconsistent. She seems to be supporting two apparently conflicting memory strands which have traditionally – albeit not without exceptions – been supported along party political lines with the political left usually prioritising Holocaust centred memory whereas the right would normally be more predisposed towards an emphasis on German suffering. Merkel's GDR biography might be considered to provide a convenient explanation for this contradiction. After all, her emphasis on Holocaust centred memory has become particularly evident in the way she has fostered relations with Israel right from the beginning of her chancellorship. And as both she herself and also a former Israeli ambassador to Germany have remarked, the state in which Merkel grew up, the GDR, had highly problematic relations with Israel.

The suggestion that Angela Merkel's politics of the past is shaped by her GDR biography could be construed to be even more persuasive when considering her support for the Centre against Expulsions. Here, too, she backs those whose suffering – due to the bipolar power structure of the Cold War which officially declared the Soviets to be friends of the GDR rather than foes – went unacknowledged in the GDR: the victims of the expulsions from central and eastern Europe towards the end of the war and during its aftermath.

Hence, it could be argued that Merkel's GDR background accounts for this approach and that – in her capacity as chancellor of the Federal Republic – she has been trying to make up for the short-comings of a regime that neither recognised the state of Israel for most of its lifetime nor accepted the victim status of expellees from eastern and central Europe. Reducing Angela Merkel and her politics of the past in such a way to the role of 'the conscience of the GDR' ignores a number of other considerations, however.

The way Merkel has chosen to emphasise Holocaust centred memory in the case of Israel but not in the case of Poland suggests that 'the lessons learnt' from Germany's Holocaust past are much more diverse and unpredictable than they used to be. Similar to the red-green government under Schröder which managed to use collective memory of the Holocaust in order to justify German military involvement in the Kosovo war, which, it was argued, was necessary to avoid another 'holocaust' – in a kind of 'pick'n'mix' fashion, Merkel also calls on elements of different memory strands to lend argumentative force to her chosen course of action and legitimise it.³⁷

On numerous occasions, she has expressed the view that the past should prescribe (policy) behaviour for the present and future. It is not the past, however, that provides

³⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the way the red-green coalition used German collective memory to justify military participation in Kosovo and Afghanistan but not in Iraq, see Ruth Wittlinger and Martin Larose, No Future for Germany's Past? Collective Memory and German Foreign Policy. *German Politics* 16, no. 4 (2007): 481-495

a set of definitive 'lessons', as Merkel tries to make out, but rather the present along with present needs – as Halbwachs argued persuasively – that determines which elements of collective memory are called upon.

Merkel is thus pursuing the plan of a Centre against Expulsions even though this alienates particularly Poland, at the same time as emphasising Germany's 'special' relationship with Israel based on the Holocaust. Even if one takes into account the very different scale of atrocities committed by Nazi Germany in both cases, the differing emphasis is still striking and suggests that the real reason goes much beyond Merkel merely making up for where the GDR failed.

Her politics of the past is likely to have derived from electoral considerations and concerns of *realpolitik*. Her support for the Centre against Expulsions is no doubt due to the fact that expellees traditionally represent an important electoral clientele of the CDU/CSU. In view of the renewed focus on 'Germans as victims' in a number of discourses, recently voiced strong demands for such a Centre could hardly be ignored by a conservative German Chancellor without the risk of paying a high price for this in electoral terms. With regard to the bilateral relations with Israel, Merkel has used her politics of the past to clearly position Germany as a key ally which will support – possibly even militarily – Israel in a possible attack against by Iran. By default, this means that she has also clearly aligned Germany with the US. Her frequently expressed view that there should be a link between past, present and future and that Germany's historical responsibility should have an impact on discourse and (policy) behaviour, in particular towards Iran, illustrates the way she has used the Holocaust centred strand of German collective memory to legitimise her position and possible future action regarding this issue. Her rhetoric has certainly pushed Germany to centre stage as an ally against Iran and is likely to ensure that it plays a key role on the side of the US in future developments in the Middle East.